

WILDERNESS

Redford fights on to preserve Utah

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What is it about these times that elicits such a chest-beating affront to anything pure, wild and free? What is it about these times that manifests itself in such disregard for things greater than the sum of ourselves; intangible things that feed our souls, inspire our dreams and nurture our hopes?

— Robert Redford, from the foreword to "Stone Canyons of the Colorado Plateau."

By Jerry Spangler

Deseret News staff writer

They are places unfamiliar to most Utahns: The Paria. The Kaiparowits. Escalante River. Spooky Gulch. Devil's Garden. Death Hollow. Picaboo Canyon.

They are the names given to lands so wild they have persistently — perhaps mockingly — defied the efforts of industrialized man to tame them. Now, through the presidential proclamation designating the Grand Staircase-

Escalante National Monument, there is renewed faith among wilderness advocates that these lands will remain wild for many generations to come.

"Some areas simply need to be set aside for the soul, just the way God made them," says Robert Redford, who has spent much of the past 35 years advocating the preservation of Utah's wild lands. "I honestly believe there is a moral obligation to set aside some pieces of this country and keep them for the soul of the people. Some things should be beyond both politics and money, because they are so special."

More than any of the many warriors engaged in the battle over the future of Utah's public lands, Redford has come to personify Utah's wilderness debate. To some, he is an articulate advocate who extended his celebrity voice to a still-fledgling environmental cause in the 1970s and supported it — financially and morally — as it matured in the 1980s and

1990s. To many others, he is seen as the devil incarnate, the Hollywood meddler who derailed the economic viability of traditional Western industries such as mining, timbering and ranching.

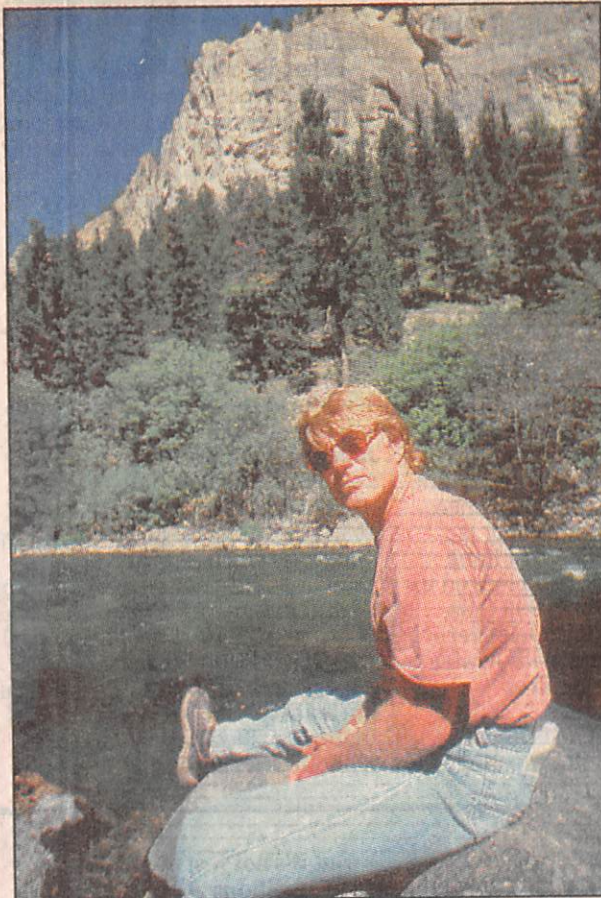
Most on both sides of the debate agree that without Redford's efforts, particularly in the mid-1970s, there probably would be no Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument today.

"I was a very small player in a very, very large group of public organizations that wanted this land protected," Redford said in an interview with the Deseret News. "Twenty years ago, hardly anyone knew about it, and there was just a handful of people fighting its development. Now, it is a national issue with a whole lot of groups involved."

Redford's role in Utah's wilderness debate goes back more than 35 years to when the Southern California native was attending the University of Colorado on an athletic scholarship. He would drive the highways back and forth between Los Angeles and Boulder, Colo., through the canyon country of Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Utah.

Impassioned with a love for geology and archaeology, he floated on the Colorado River before the Glen Canyon Dam was completed and was one of the first to visit Lake Powell after the dam was built. He explored the Escalante Canyon and the Kaiparowits Plateau.

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Robert Redford relaxes in Montana during shooting of "A River Runs Through It." He directed the film.

REDFORD

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"I would look at the formations and identify forces that created them in that way. I could see 500 million years of history stripped away where I could see it like a textbook. I just went crazy," he said.

At the same time, Redford watched as Southern California disintegrated under waves of commercial development and population growth. "I was proud to be from California, but suddenly I turned around one day and it was like it had disappeared from under my feet. I saw the consequences of out-of-control development for short-term gains. The place I grew up in and was proud of as a child had simply disappeared."

In 1961, Redford moved to Utah, as he says, for two reasons: the land and the people. "It is not like I came to rip it up or to take it away. I came here to be part of something."

Like tens of thousands of California refugees who have come since, Redford saw Utah as a place where he wanted to raise his family, where they could have a future that was rapidly disappearing in Southern California.

"It was a place where I could see a future. So I committed myself to this state and its future for my own sake and my children's sake. That's what brought me here. So obviously, when those assets that brought me here suddenly got threatened and I feel the arguments for giving them away or selling them away or digging them up are bogus, then I will take issue with it."

His love affair with Utah continued to blossom through the 1960s. "The more I traveled the world with my job, I grew to appreciate it even more. I realized that Utah was even more special than I had thought because I saw there was no other place like it. And that made me even more determined to protect it."

Utah in the 1960s was still largely undeveloped and undiscovered. It wasn't until 1974 that Redford's passion for the land crystallized into political activism. That was the year it was brought to Redford's attention that a consortium of five energy companies was planning a 3,000 megawatt coal-fired plant on the Kaiparowits Plateau — now part of the Grand

Staircase-Escalante National Monument — to generate power for California.

Redford was familiar with the area under consideration, and he believed a power plant would be disastrous from the standpoint of air and water pollution. Californians at that time were already passing strict environmental laws that made development of such power plants infeasible there.

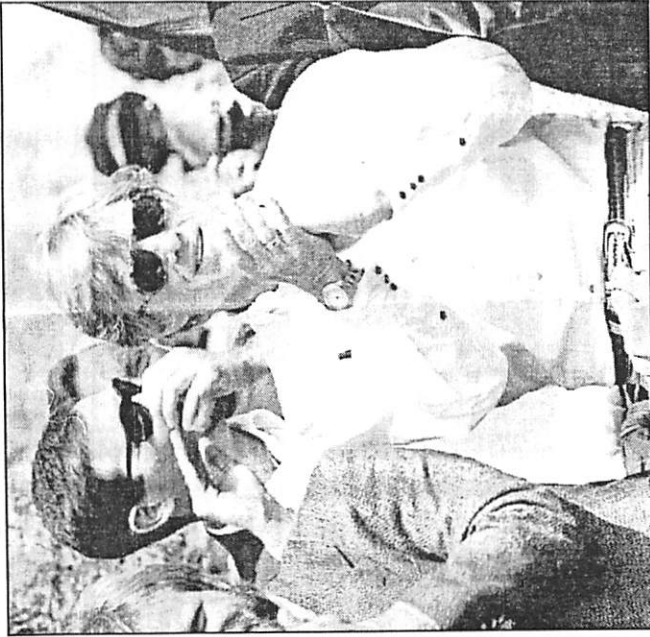
"They were coming into Utah to use Utah's assets to take for themselves, which was fine from the standpoint of California," Redford recalls. But there was a small group of people in the Southwest who began to question what the effect would be on Utah's future and whether Utah really stood to gain as much as it would lose. They went to Redford, he said, "because the public officials and elected officials were too invested in the power plant to listen to another point of view."

"I had to be careful. I was very much aware of the double-edged sword of being a celebrity because there are a lot of people who resent you speaking out, who feel you have not earned the right, that you do not have the credibility and so forth. So I decided to really look at this plan because, in my gut, I felt it would be a terrible mistake (to build a power plant on the Kaiparowits). It was right in the middle of five contiguous national parks and monuments. We already had demonstrations of what other power plants had done to the quality of life in other areas."

The proposed plant would have been bigger than any of the other plants already built in the West, and as Redford learned, it was to be the first of 11 more such plants planned around the West. "For me, it translated into disaster," he said.

But Redford also knew that he could not effectively speak against a development that he knew nothing about. He requested the assistance of environmental groups, raised money to open an office in Salt Lake City and hired a small staff to investigate the environmental and economic ramifications of the project. This came at a time when the power consortium was spending \$2 million a year on public relations.

The one-year investigation revealed the project was a boondoggle, Redford said, not only environmentally but economically. And Redford and others began



Robert Redford applauds President Clinton after Clinton announced the creation of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

speaking publicly against the power plant. That campaign culminated in a feature story on "60 Minutes," which generated 6,000 pieces of mail, most of it opposing the development. Shortly thereafter, in 1976, the consortium abandoned its development plans for the Kaiparowits.

Redford and his small band of then-unknown environmental activists cheered, while residents of southern Utah who had envisioned high-paying mining jobs vilified him. Angry townspeople in Kanab burned Redford in effigy.

"I was sort of targeted," Redford said. "They blamed me. The irony of that was later on I formed an organization called the Institute for Resource Management here at Sundance where we could hold conferences bringing together both sides of an issue and honestly and openly debate it and see how we could move forward. I ended up with Howard Allen, head of Southern Cal Edison on our board, the guy who had been my adversary, who said he had to thank me for allowing them (the consortium) to scapegoat me."

After Redford asked, "What do you mean?" he said that Allen explained the project was in trouble and had become too expensive.

more and more strongly about it because there is more pressure to protect that which is valuable for the future. But this time, the difference was we had a whole different population joining forces against this plant. It wasn't just me alone speaking out."

In fact, Redford still marvels at how little his name has been mentioned in the latest controversy. And he speaks proudly of the efforts of others who worked to thwart the Andalex development.

But he also speaks as a 35-year resident of Utah who is embarrassed by the actions and words of the state's elected officials. "They can give you all the propaganda they want, all the double talk they want, but the facts are pretty clear: this is not a delegation that has much respect for the land or for ecological balance. I am surprised there can't be more open and honest debate rather than inflammatory, almost mean-spirited rhetoric that does not dignify this state and to me, is an embarrassment."

"If you look at what has happened here, the way politicians have been behaving for the last two years as though these lands were their own fiefdom," he said. "It is not. It is land that belongs to the people, and all this rhetoric and kind of spurious arguments that this land is being taken away from the people simply isn't true. It is being kept where it belongs."

The national monument designation now forces the delegation to address land management issues they have effectively ignored for years, and it will force the state to address wilderness management of lands inside the new monument. But it could also have a negative long-term effect on other wilderness lands in Utah. The antagonism of Utah's congressional delegation and other conservative Western delegations could thwart attempts by conservationists to designate a total of 5.7 million acres as Utah wilderness.

"There is still 4 million other acres that have to be put into the process," Redford said. "I honestly believe this forces due process where we have had none before, where these 4 million acres will be looked at in a broad and deep view. I will be happy to be part of that process, but I will not honor a narrow-minded process or a process that tries to manipulate the outcome."

Is it realistic to expect an angry, Republican-controlled Congress to

designate more Utah wilderness in light of Clinton's action? "Probably not," he said.

"You have to look at history: how the West has always been in the hands of a few people but never in the hands of the people at large. The people who had the power, the cattle barons, the mining companies, the railroads, the power barons who held the West in their hands. Right now in this state we have the majority of the people asking for one thing and the congressional delegation pushing something else. Ask yourself why?"

"They take a bill and it doesn't work and then they try to force a bad bill through and it is rejected. It has failed over and over again and yet they keep trying, rather than accepting the fact of the matter that this (5.7 million acres of wilderness) is what the people want. When they try to attach it to another bill, it becomes an insidious means of bypassing due process. You ask yourself why are they staying on this track. I don't want to be too cynical here, but if you look at the history, there has been some collusion between business and political leadership. . . I can't prove that, but it certainly becomes suspicious in terms of their behavior."

Redford is a firm believer there is a new West emerging where traditional industries — mining, timber, agriculture — no longer have the economic or political influence they once did. It is a West where the value of the land is measured in values other than those on profit-loss statements.

"I see a world that is rapidly moving toward a kind of physical crisis. The resources we took for granted just a few years ago are running out, and they are running out by our own design because we don't have proper leadership to manage and balance what resources should be kept for our survival and which resources should be developed for our survival."

"If someone does not move in and take the strong leadership role about what we protect and what we develop, rather than just what we develop, we are going to have a major crisis, and we will be disrespecting the future. We will be disrespecting the children we bring into this world, and their children. If we don't do something that is a legacy for them that they can be proud of, then we are disrespecting the future."

And, he said, preserving Utah is all about the future.